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How did we come to this? review of the funding crisis affecting further education college development in England

Paul Greenhalgh and Sara Lilley**

ABSTRACT

A review of progress on the Further Education building programme, identifying the main focus of the college developments in relation to regeneration and planning and the conditions that may have contributed to the funding crisis. A thorough literature review was undertaken, and a database compiled, containing information on college developments. Four themes were identified as most relevant to the Built Environment: funding of new college buildings; consolidation on one site and anchoring of regeneration projects; project procurement and delivery, and environmentally sustainable buildings. Four case study examples of colleges have been selected: Middlesbrough, Gateshead, Luton and Sussex Coast College Hastings, all examples of large college projects with a national spread.

Keywords: Further Education, college development, funding, building programme.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper:

- Reviews the Further Education building programme to date using published literature;
- Identifies the main focus of the college developments in relation to regeneration and planning and the conditions that may have contributed to the funding crisis;
- Includes four case studies of college developments; and
- Identifies (where apparent) opportunities for further built environment related research in this field.

There are currently 376 further education colleges in England. At incorporation in 1993, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) decided that the 9 million sq m of colleges' estate was bigger than needed and that there was scope for rationalisation in colleges, including through the disposal of surplus land and buildings (National Audit Office, 2008). Consequently, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) began a ten year programme of rationalisation and modernisation of the college estate by obtaining funding for the FEFC to distribute to further education colleges for capital projects.

When the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) replaced the FEFC in 2001, it adopted its predecessor's approach for improving efficiency by downsizing the estate, ensuring fitness for purpose and improving accessibility for disabled people. The LSC's main roles in managing the capital programme include:

- Setting the strategy for the programme and the rules colleges must follow to gain approval for their projects;
- Approving capital projects and providing funding where there is a gap between the approved project cost and the amount of money a college can raise for the project;
- Supporting colleges through the initiation, design and development of their project; and
- Paying agreed grants to colleges (NAO, 2008).

Over a ten year period, the capital investment to target renewal and modernisation of the FE estate has increased year on year (LSC, 2007). LSC operates two levels of capital project approvals for FE and 16–19 capital funding: approval in principle (AiP) and detailed approval (LSC, 2006). All proposals that have a total capital cost of more than £10m are normally required to make an AiP. Colleges undertaking feasibility studies for projects greater than £5m including campus relocations and PFI can apply to LSC for financial support towards the fee costs.

Between April 2001 and March 2008 the LSC approved colleges' projects at the final detailed application stage with a total cost of £4.2bn and grant support totalling £1.7bn (LSC, 2009). By March 2004, 61% of colleges had detailed approval for at least one project; by March 2008 this had risen to 88%; only around 30 colleges in England had yet to have a project approved. This demonstrates a significant commitment from the public sector to the renewal and rationalisation of colleges' estate.

From studying the examples of new college projects in England part funded by the LSC over the last two years, it is apparent that their funding is usually predicated on the realisation of development (usually residential) potential of their old sites, the value of which is used to fund the new build.

'Colleges will be expected to contribute as much as they can from the sale of redundant assets'

LSC, 2007 p10

However, as a result of the credit crunch and economic downturn/recession and its impact on residential markets in particular, the financing of new college projects, and therefore the further education building programme is in jeopardy. Colleges were unable to raise as much funding as the LSC previously expected and the size of applications for LSC grants were increasing.

'The pace of demand for funding by colleges overall has increased because projects and the scale of Government funding they require are becoming increasingly ambitious. In addition there are

early signs that the ability of colleges to raise their own funds to help pay for proposed projects is being affected by the (economic) downturn. Many proposed schemes rely on either the sale of land or assets and on the ability of colleges to gain financial support from the banks. This may have an affect on the private funding available for schemes.'

DfES, 2008, page 2

NAO (2008) predicted that the LSC was likely to need colleges to provide around half the funding of new building; by contrast the LSC support rate for projects approved in principle (i.e. projects that will cost more than £10m) in 2007–08 was 74%. The LSC, in consultation with DIUS considered what changes and possible project prioritisation it could introduce in 2008–09, to make completion of the programme more affordable within the current national budget levels. No doubt this finding influenced the establishment of the review of the funding programme, and the delay in approvals in principle from December 2008 to spring 2009.

The DfES (2008) announced that an independent review into the operation of the FE building programme would be undertaken, by Sir Andrew Foster, former chief executive of the Audit Commission. The review would assess existing LSC processes and consider how they can be enhanced to deliver more effective management of the programme in the current economic environment and beyond. This suggested that LSC management had not been as effective as the Government would have liked. This was later confirmed from the review and will be discussed later in this paper. It also appeared that the Government wanted new college building to form part of its recession-beating public sector investment programme:

"More than 250 (253) projects are currently underway and funded by the LSC – helped by the recent decision agreed with the Treasury to accelerate £220m from future budgets to help beat the downturn. This money will be spent to bring forward building, benefiting learners and regenerating communities."

LSC, 2008, page 2

College applications for LSC funding that were due for decision in December 2008 were deferred until March 2009. The 253 projects underway or already approved at this time were not affected.

The 'Review of the Capital Programme in Further Education' was published in March 2009 and considers the circumstances that led to the current position of the Building Colleges for the Future Programme, and what lessons could be learned. Foster (2009) cited a mismanagement of the programme (lack of financial predictions or control), as well as a surge in college proposals, opening a gap between resources identified and the cost of projects underway or in the pipeline. The review concluded:

'The priority business is to agree how the present demand led approach can be replaced by a needs based approach with explicit priorities and choice criteria. These should inform the necessary decisions about the future of capital programme'

Foster, 2009, page 7

In March 2009, Skills Secretary John Denham froze all 144 college building and improvement projects after admitting that the Building Colleges for the Future programme (with a three year budget of £2.3 billion) would need a further £5.7 billion to fund the schemes awaiting approval. Subsequently funding was frozen for 79 colleges awaiting final approval for their schemes from the LSC and 65 colleges awaiting approval in principle (the stage before final approval) (Hayman, 2009).

In response to the funding withdrawal, it was announced in the April 2009 Budget (Great Britain. HM Treasury, 2009) that the Chancellor had allocated £300m of new funding to the programme. Additionally the LSC Chief Executive confirmed the LSC would announce new projects in June 2009, working through applications using five key factors: the education and skills impact of the scheme; the impact on local economic regeneration; the implications for third parties of not proceeding with projects involved in the scheme; the condition of the college itself; and value for money (Hayman, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The research utilised desk based research, and carried out an extensive literature review of relevant background reports, research reports and news articles on the Further Education building programme.

Furthermore the research gathered information on each college development allocated funding under the programme, by undertaking internet searches of college websites and of other relevant sources including planning documents, and regeneration journals. A list of the colleges' allocated LSC grant funding and detailing how much funding, was obtained from the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) website. The project team adopted a threshold of £10m, the same as that implemented by the LSC for requirement for the AiP. A database was compiled recording the following information, this database is to be maintained and updated and may be made available to other researchers in the university:

- Details of the site on which the new college buildings are being built;
- Any plans for the old site (if moving to a new site);
- Information on developers, contractors, architects involved;
- Total investment and contribution of LSC grant, college funding or other funding;
- Size of the development (square metres/square feet);
- Start and end date of the development;
- Key partners and key contacts; and
- Planning status.

From the information gathered, four main themes were identified, as most relevant to the Built Environment, these include: Funding of new college buildings; Consolidation on one site and anchoring of regeneration flagship projects; Project procurement and delivery and Environmentally Sustainable buildings.

Case study colleges were selected, as examples of the main themes identified. The four case study examples are indicative of large college projects with a national spread. They include Sussex Coast College Hastings which is the biggest (PFI) college project in England. Gateshead College and Middlebrough College both anchor regeneration projects. Middlesbrough is also an example of a multi site college moving to a single site. Luton College is an example of a new build on the existing College site.

FUNDING OF NEW COLLEGE BUILDINGS

Almost all colleges chose to proceed with new build on a grant funding basis, reflecting in many cases their ability to part-fund projects through asset disposals, reserves and borrowings (NAO, 2008).

NAO (2008) reported that the main reason for colleges considering a new build was that their original buildings were not fit for purpose (47% of colleges); other colleges needed more places for learners or to improve their attractiveness for potential learners.

The DfES and the LSC took account of the ability of many colleges to make a substantial financial contribution to their project because:

- Many colleges owned surplus land or buildings that could be sold for development, often in urban locations, and there was a need for reducing the overall size of the FE estate;
- Almost all colleges could take out secured loans (which are not counted as public borrowing) against their assets; and
- Some colleges could use financial reserves that they had accumulated (NAO, 2008).

Luton Sixth Form College was identified from the research as an example of a college using funding additional to the LSC grant, from the sale of land, to finance the development of the new college buildings.

This is illustrated in Case Study 1 below.

CASE STUDY 1: Luton Sixth Form College



Luton sixth form college's new college buildings are being built on the existing college site playing fields behind the current buildings at Bradgers Hill Road. The two small areas where the old buildings previously stood are to be sold for residential development. The project is due for completion in September 2010 and is funded from the College reserves and capital receipts from the sale of land, in addition to commercial borrowing and investment from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The total investment of the development is £56m with £49.8m funding from the LSC grant, this is a large percentage of funding from the LSC. The aims of the development are:

- Provide state of the art education and sports facilities for students.
- To create a stimulating but relaxing environment in which students and staff can work.
- To provide accommodation for more students, in line with growing demand for places.
- To create a building that will have a positive impact on the local environment by using efficient systems and sustainable materials.
- To ensure that the College's funding in the next 70 years can be spent on education and services to its students, and not on maintaining and heating old and inefficient buildings (Luton College, 2009).

The FEFC funding approach used prior to September 2003, restricting funding to 35% of project costs, was deemed by NAO, to be too rigid and relatively unsophisticated; it was replaced with a system based on affordability. It is reported that between June 2001 and August 2003, 207 (74%) of the 281 projects receiving detailed approval were funded at 35% of the total cost.

NAO (2008) found that the grant-based approach to project funding has been successful in delivering effective projects. Colleges have made good use of the grant offered by the LSC and also obtained substantial additional funding from the disposal of surplus assets, taking out secured loans and using their reserves.

'The Council therefore expected colleges to provide the majority of their project costs through disposal of any surplus assets, and use of reserves.'

NAO, 2008, page 5

This was not the case for Luton Sixth Form College, as discussed above, and a large percentage of the overall investment was provided from the LSC grant.

NAO (2008) reported that the funding arrangements have required colleges to increase their external borrowings; college debts have increased from around £200m in 2001–02 to £731m in long term loans in 2006–07, and will continue to rise rapidly; colleges with large debts could be more vulnerable to loss of income if they fail to generate the projected demand for courses from employers and learners.

It was reported that by March 2008, 41% of total cost was grant-funded by LSC, with colleges funding the balance through external borrowing (24%), the proceeds of asset disposals (17%), use of their reserves (13%) and other external funding (3%) such as grants from RDAs (NAO, 2008). Figure 1 below illustrates the proportion of funding of new college developments from various funding including: LSC grant; borrowing; asset disposal; cash reserves or other. This shows the largest proportion of funding coming from LSC grant, and then borrowing.

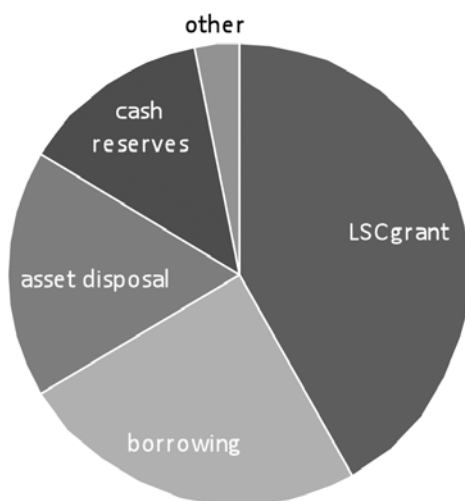


Figure 1 Sources of funding for capital projects given detailed approval 2004–2005 to 2007–2008

The Public Accounts Committee reported that the LSC mismanagement of the programme had left further education colleges deep in debt, and by the end of 2008, 23 colleges had debts exceeding 40% of their annual income. The report stated:

'While the LSC requires colleges to consider private finance or public-private partnerships as a means of funding, colleges have rarely chosen them. This is because the value, size and scope of the projects have not generally been large enough to make them financially attractive as private finance deals.'

Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2009, page 15

The Public Accounts Committee recommended delayed schemes to be merged with the Building Schools for the Future projects to make them more attractive to private financing. Furthermore due to the economic downturn/recession, colleges were finding it difficult to realise their private contribution through borrowing and land sales:

'...as the building industry contracted there was increased capacity to take college work more rapidly through development stages; and some foresaw growing pressure on public sector borrowing, making a tight fiscal settlement likely after 2010.'

Foster, 2009, page 15

CASE STUDY 2: Gateshead College



The development of Gateshead College is part of the wider regeneration of East Gateshead, initiated by Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council and originally funded by the SRB Challenge Fund; with funding from One NorthEast (ONE) for the Baltic Business Park. The College has relocated to a new 160,000 sq ft building at Baltic Campus, Terrace Hill's (a publicly listed property development company) Baltic Business Quarter at Gateshead Quays; the old site at Low Fell, is currently up for sale for a residential development.

The Baltic Business Quarter is an office development, South of Gateshead Quays. The aim of the Baltic Business Quarter is to develop a commercial community; a Design Centre for the North is proposed alongside the College. Total investment in the college development was estimated at £39m with LSC grant funding of an estimated £17m (Gateshead College, 2008).

CONSOLIDATION ON ONE SITE AND ANCHORING OF FLAGSHIP REGENERATION PROJECTS

A number of colleges operating over split sites opted to consolidate onto one other brownfield site. In many cases, the colleges released the old sites for residential development. The new development capitalised on public sector promotion of the brownfield sites in the locality. Middlesbrough College is an example of this (case study 3).

Guidance from LSC, 2002, to colleges on their property strategies suggests land valuations could show the opportunity for realisation of potential sale proceeds. A college considering an option in its strategy that includes reducing the number of sites or buildings should obtain professional valuations to ensure that land and buildings surplus to requirements are marketed at the right asking price for appropriate new uses, and to help them anticipate the likely receipts and their timing. It goes on to suggest that suitable developers may be prepared to purchase an existing site subject to planning permission for non-educational use at their own risk under an option agreement or conditional contract to purchase. LSC (2006) confirms that LSC consent is required before an option agreement is entered into where the land or buildings have a value in excess of £5m (now £1.5m or 5%).

CASE STUDY 3: Middlesbrough College



Middlesbrough College moved onto a single site College campus at Middlehaven, from previously being located across four campuses. The relocation to Middlehaven was part of Tees Valley Regeneration's masterplan for Middlehaven. The partnership was led by the College with Tees Valley Regeneration, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Middlesbrough Metropolitan Borough Council, English Partnerships, One NorthEast and the University of Teesside.

'...the College is considered to be fundamental to the success of the regeneration of Greater Middlehaven, with its intended development of a first class modern educational institution that will carry through the momentum of regeneration that has already commenced'

Middlesbrough Council, 2006, page 4

It was decided unfeasible to redevelop the previous college sites at Marton, Longland, Acklam and Kirby. Three of the previous college sites Kirby, Marton and Longland, were proposed for residential developments of 516 properties, and sold to Taylor Wimpey, with the sale of the land contributing to financing the development of the new campus at Middlehaven. Planning documents concluded that the redevelopment of the three sites 'would help to meet "the shortage of readily deliverable, previously developing housing sites in the Borough" from 2009 to 2012.' (Middlesbrough Council, 2006 page 6).

Recently, Middlesbrough College was announced as a BURA Award winner for Best Practice in Regeneration 2009 (BURA, 2009).

There had been no national prioritisation of projects and as a consequence of the initial arrangements some areas and colleges with the greatest need had not received the highest priority. Therefore some regions had made more progress than others and the nine regions varied substantially (NAO, 2008).

Some colleges have contributed towards regeneration plans of the area. They have been able to obtain grants from Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and other regeneration and heritage bodies where projects address their regeneration aims (NAO, 2008). For example a number of the college developments identified in the research, are contributing to the local areas overall regeneration plans, examples include Gateshead College and Middlesbrough College (see Case Studies 2 and 3 below).

There are a number of possible regeneration benefits for the surrounding areas. As in the case of the Middlesbrough College development, the area of Middlehaven has benefitted in many ways, these include:

- Greater social cohesion in an area suffering deprivation problems (unemployment, long term illnesses and life expectancy);
- Inward investment, enabling the formation of direct business links;
- Improvement in qualifications and training achieved, from enhanced college facilities and teaching, leading to greater workforce skills and knowledge for the people in the area;
- Promotion of an active culture in the provision of sport related education and participation opportunities, from the availability of the sports facilities to the community;
- The high standard of design, at a prime location close to Middlehaven Dock, would promote and attract other developments to Middlehaven, increasing inward investment to the area, and ensuring the success of the mixed use regeneration plan (Middlesbrough Council, 2006).

The benefits of co-investment with other public sector partners, including those involved in urban regeneration through Regional Development Agencies and urban regeneration companies, were recognised by the LSC. To ensure the benefits of co-investment are maximised for all parties, regional capital strategies should address the aims and objectives of other investing authorities to help ensure investment in educational projects can also benefit broader urban and rural regeneration educational projects (LSC, 2006).

PROJECT PROCUREMENT AND DELIVERY

The FEFC required colleges to examine whether they could obtain better value for money through private finance or public private partnerships (PFI/PPP). The research identified few examples of PFI/PPP. However the biggest college project in England has been procured using PFI/PPI. This is the development of Sussex Coast College Hastings, which is discussed at greater length in Case Study 4.

It was found that the scale of most college projects was insufficient to generate interest among private contractors in PFI/PPP deals. Design and build was the preferred option for 57% of colleges. A third used traditional contracting where the design and construction are provided separately; this option was only to be used when it could be demonstrated to offer better value for money than design and build. Most traditional procurement was for smaller projects below £20m (NAO, 2008). Table 1 below, shows the percentage of colleges opting for various procurement strategies.

	£0–£5m %	£5m– £10m %	£10m– £20m %	£20m– £30m %	>£30m %	Total %
Design and build	20	8	10	8	11	57
Traditional	21	5	4	2	1	33
Other	3	1	4	1	1	10
Total	44	14	18	11	13	100

Table 1: Contract strategies and project size

Source: NAO, 2008

CASE STUDY 4: Sussex Coast College Hastings



This was the largest new build of the college programme with a total investment of £92m and LSC funding grant of £72.3m. John Laing plc and residential partner Gladedale were involved in the mixed used development, which is part of the regeneration of Hastings Town Centre. John Laing claims to provide integrated solutions for colleges and universities requiring new accommodation; the model includes cross-subsidising shortfalls in capital budgets through the development of existing sites; providing finance, project management and property development. It claims to take total risk and contributing to wider regeneration improvements (Laing, 2009).

Sussex Coast College Hastings includes facilities for up to 2500 students, plus housing, healthcare, parking and a business and technology centre. The development is spread over two sites, Station Plaza and Ore Valley. John Laing and Gladedale also purchased three other sites from the College, which will be developed for housing. Proceeds from the sale contributed towards financing the construction of the new college buildings, this was central to the success of the new college project (Laing, 2007).

ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE BUILDINGS

The Government's aim was to modernise the college estate, but it also aimed to make it more environmentally sustainable. The Further Education capital programme enabled colleges in England to make good progress in renewing and rationalising their estate, replacing poor quality buildings with higher quality, more suitable facilities (NAO, 2008).

Projects granted funding earlier in the programme gave less attention to ensuring the buildings were environmentally sustainable. It was recommended that sustainability was embodied in the programme from the outset, via an uplift in LSC's capital cost criteria targeted specifically at sustainable elements of building design and construction (Turner and Townsend, 2006).

Since 2006, the LSC increased the cost allowance for sustainability in the range of acceptable cost levels. Colleges were given the opportunity to apply for an additional cost allowance of 10% of the net building cost for elements within the building that address sustainability issues such as Part L of building regs (LSC, 2006).

It was recommended that the LSC encourage the establishment of an environmental assessment method, tailored to the needs of the sector, for example the widely recognised Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Measure (BREEAM) approach (Turner and Townsend (2006). From 2007, to qualify for LSC capital funds, all capital project proposals needed to address sustainable development by:

- Meeting and preferably exceeding the minimum of Part L of the Building regulations.
- Ensuring that the completed development meets the criteria to achieve excellent BREEAM ratings.
- Maximising the use of natural lighting and ventilation by using wind and solar power to generate light and heat and rainwater to reduce water usage; and
- Embedding the principles of sustainability in the design of buildings and building systems.

(LSC, 2007)

Sussex Coast College Hastings was built to a BREEAM rating of at least 'very good', (buildings which meet or exceed guidelines for sustainability). Sustainable design aspects incorporated in the building include rainwater recycling, a biomass boiler, solar thermal heating for hot water and a ground source heat pump. The standards of environmental sustainability and thus standards of quality were rising, and this contributed to a rise in the scale and cost of projects, resulting in colleges applying for more funding (Foster, 2009).

The Further Education system will now be contributing to the Government's own targets for reducing the UK's carbon emissions by at least 26 per cent by 2020, with all new colleges being zero carbon by 2016 (LSC 2008).

FUTURE OF THE FURTHER EDUCATION BUILDING PROGRAMME

On September 1st 2009, LSC gave approval to 12 colleges to begin their '*new and improved*' building projects. This follows the prioritisation and cost reduction exercise carried out previously, using five key factors.

'The colleges were asked to make cost reductions to their initial project plans, to maximise borrowing within prudent limits, and to examine other possible sources of funds, while maintaining the planned benefits for future learners and enabling construction to proceed rapidly. The aim was to deliver best value for money for the taxpayer and to fund the maximum possible number of projects.'

LSC, 2009

The twelve colleges include: Barnsley College; Bournville College; Furness College; Hartlepool College of Further Education; Kirklees College; Leyton Sixth Form College; North West Kent College; St Helens College; Sandwell College; South Thames College; Tresham Institute of Further and Higher Education, Corby and West Cheshire College

Two further colleges were granted funding: Manchester College will be revitalising its current campus to improve its vocational and sixth form facilities. The project is the final phase of the College's redevelopment scheme and will cost £27.5m with the LSC contributing £7.038m. Lancashire, Skelmersdale and Ormskirk College (part of Newcastle College Group) will create a new campus which will be central to the town's redevelopment. The total project cost is £42.8m and the LSC will contribute £32.6m (LSC, 2009).

Despite approval of the 14 colleges aforementioned, the future of the college building programme is presently uncertain. It is still unclear what will happen to the colleges that had funding frozen which include 79 colleges awaiting final approval for their schemes and 65 colleges awaiting approval in principle. It is currently unclear whether all of these plans will eventually be funded, or whether some may not be funded as they do not meet the criteria under the prioritisation exercise.

By 2010 the LSC will have closed and handed over its functions to 150 local authorities, a new Skills Funding Agency and a new Young People's Learning Agency (NAO 2008) a change of responsibility which may impact on the Building Colleges for the Future programme.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

The paper has identified four main themes in relation to the Further Education Building Programme relevant to the Built Environment: funding of new college buildings; consolidation on one site and anchoring of regeneration projects; project procurement and delivery; and environmentally sustainable buildings. The main issues have been discussed in relation to the four main themes and opportunities for further research in this area identified (where apparent).

To summarise, the LSC grant based approach of the Building Colleges for the Future Programme has been effective for some colleges but not for others, this has left a number of colleges with a high proportion of debt, due in part to the economic downturn/recession.

Colleges moving to other sites have benefitted from co-investment from other public sector partners, and in turn this has contributed to the urban regeneration of some areas, for example Gateshead and Middlesbrough colleges have directly contributed to regeneration plans for the areas, and the anchoring of regeneration flagship projects. The colleges have used finance from the sale of land of old sites (sold for residential developments) to contribute to financing the new building.

Other factors include the increase in building costs from the need to build to high environmentally sustainable standards, and this has subsequently increased the amount of funding needed for some of the college projects.

Further research could be undertaken to review the extent to which and how successfully capital project buildings, granted funding after 2007, incorporated sustainability issues into building design, and delivered sustainable buildings.

This paper has highlighted the significance of funding and procurement and opportunities for further investigation and analysis of performance of different procurement methods, as well as other research opportunities related to Quantity Surveying.

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CASE STUDY COLLEGE WEBSITES

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John Laing website:	www.laing.com
Luton Sixth Form College	www.lutonsfc.ac.uk/lutonhome/index.html .
Middlesbrough College	www.mbro.ac.uk/Home/index.aspx
Sussex Coast College Hastings	www.sussexcoast.ac.uk/

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AiP:	Application in principle
BREEAM:	Building Research establishment Environment Assessment Method
DfES:	Department for Education and Skills
DIUS:	Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills
FE:	Further Education
FEFC:	Further Education Funding Council
LSC:	Learning and Skills Council
NAO:	National Audit Office
ONE:	One NorthEast
SRB:	Single Regeneration Budget